



County of Los Angeles CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICE

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Chief Executive Officer

August 3, 2010

To: Supervisor Gloria Molina, Chair
Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas
Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky
Supervisor Don Knabe
Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich

From: William T Fujioka
Chief Executive Officer

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A BLUEPRINT TO END HUNGER IN LOS ANGELES - A PLAN FOR CHANGE – AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

On November 24, 2009, on a motion by Supervisor Yaroslavsky, the Board of Supervisors directed this office to encourage all County departments to participate in efforts to coordinate and, where possible, expand the reach of existing anti-hunger programs and initiatives, and begin examining the relevant recommendations in the "Blueprint to End Hunger" (Blueprint) to explore future goals and benchmarks. On December 14, 2009, a copy of the Blueprint was provided to all County departments seeking their input and promoting awareness of the food insecurity issue. On February 8, 2010, we provided your Board with a status report on countywide efforts to feed the hungry, which included information on existing collaboratives and outreach efforts to address the food insecurity problem.

On April 22, 2010, Supervisor Yaroslavsky hosted a meeting with key County departments and community stakeholders to brainstorm on possible strategies that Los Angeles County can implement to address the hunger crisis. The major challenge communicated by those in attendance was to continue to focus on solutions that will break down barriers that prevent eligible populations from applying for federally funded nutrition programs.

As the entire nation continues to struggle with the economic downturn, the growth of unemployment has continued to increase the ranks of those seeking public assistance from the County. The Food Stamp Program (FSP) in Los Angeles County offers

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nutrition benefits to participating families and individuals, supports employment, and provides economic benefits (FSP dollars spent) to local communities. Without FSP assistance, many families would be forced to make the difficult decision between paying rent and buying adequate nutritious food to feed their families. Too many low-income families and individuals who are eligible for the program do not participate, and thus go without nutrition assistance that could stretch their food dollars at the grocery store. Furthermore, communities miss out on the benefits provided by new FSP dollars flowing into the local economy. Recent data has revealed that both California and Los Angeles County have FSP participation rates at 50 percent of the eligible population. Approximately 30.4 percent of the State's entire food stamp (FS) caseload resides in Los Angeles County. As of April 2010, 896,310 individuals were receiving FS benefits in Los Angeles County.

Recommended Strategies

This report identifies three areas directly touching the Blueprint action plan. The target areas focus on: 1) Implementation of the Face-to-Face Waiver (FFW); 2) Public Charge Issue (PCI); and 3) Increased Outreach.

We strongly believe that increasing access to the application process by the implementation of the FFW, re-educating the community concerning eligibility requirements associated with the PCI, and focusing on enhanced outreach is critical. Misinformation regarding FSP eligibility requirements, program regulations, and immigration status consequences are still common within communities. Over the last several years, rules have changed which impact FSP benefits. This has caused confusion and is a deterrent for potentially eligible households and individuals to apply for benefits. The County has been working diligently to address and/or eliminate, where possible, unnecessary barriers identified that have kept those most in need from participating in the FSP.

Face-to-Face Waiver

The County's Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) has made the goal of increasing and improving access to FS applications for thousands of eligible Angelenos one of its highest priorities. Limited access to the FS application process and low FS participation means less for all Los Angeles residents, less nutrition assistance for eligible residents, less economic activities, and less sales tax revenue to the State and local government. These losses can be mitigated by eliminating unnecessary barriers to increasing access and participation in the FSP.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) is fully aware of California's low FSP participation rate. CDSS sought and received from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), a waiver allowing telephone interviews to be conducted in place of face-to-face interviews. This FS policy change will make applying for FS more accessible and convenient. Individuals and families will no longer have to come to a district office for their interview. They will be able to have their FS interview over the telephone. The implementation of telephone interviews is a critical step to remove barriers to receiving FSP benefits. This new method of enrolling and retaining individuals in the program will help to increase the FSP participation rate among eligible Angelenos. Please note that this USDA Waiver will expire May 31, 2013.

On July 14, 2008, CDSS provided initial instructions on how to implement telephone interviews in place of face-to-face interviews. The FFW initially applied only to certain households. DPSS successfully implemented Phase I of the FFW in September 2009 for the "Non-Assistance" FS household populations at the mandated quarterly recertification process and for the elderly and/or disabled population at both the Initial Application and/or Recertification (IA/R) stage.

On October 23, 2009, CDSS expanded the telephone interviews to all individuals applying for FS benefits - Phase II. This recent FSP policy change will allow the option of telephone interviews to be conducted in place of face-to-face interviews at the IA/R for all FS households. DPSS is in the process of implementing Phase II of the FS FFW interview procedure. DPSS is targeting July 30, 2010, for implementation of the telephone interview option for all new applicants applying for FS benefits. Recertification for all ongoing FS households is targeted for August 31, 2010. This means that by August 2010, all individuals applying for FS benefits or being recertified for FS benefits will have the option of having a FS telephone interview in place of a face-to-face district office interview.

The major benefits of the implementation of the FFW interview option are to increase participation in the FSP and achieve the following:

- Increase and improve access for working families and others who cannot get to the County district office during traditional hours;
- Reduce the complexity and stigma of applying for FS benefits in a County district office setting;
- Provide a new and convenient way for Angelenos to sign up for FS;
- Reduce participation barriers associated in applying for FS benefits;

- Improve applicant/participant flow at the County district office lobbies; and
- Expand and strengthen partnerships with a network of partner organizations.

Public Charge Issue

The PCI is a major barrier that keeps eligible families and individuals from applying for FSP. Eligible populations with pending naturalization determinations and citizenship applications continue to shy away from the FSP due to fears that their applications may be negatively impacted. Expanding access to FSP through public education and outreach efforts is critical to dispel misinformation regarding the PCI concern. The word must get out that the FSP is a nutrition assistance program designed to help low-income people buy food.

The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) District 23 and the County have entered into a partnership to help break down myths surrounding the PCI barrier. USCIS informed states and counties that certain public benefits, including the FSP, are not subject to PCI determinations. USCIS recently released an updated public education notice clarifying the PCI. The notice will be made available through DPSS offices and community and faith-based organizations serving low-income individuals and families.

DPSS has implemented many FSP outreach strategies and partnerships that have had positive results in the FSP participation rate in Los Angeles County. The most recent partnership with USCIS will focus on implementing the following three outreach strategies:

1. Conduct informational PCI forums throughout the County where representatives from DPSS, USCIS, and the USDA FNS will address (educate) media outlets, community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, community advocates, immigration attorneys, and specialty law firms on the PCI;
2. Partner with Univision Television to conduct a Spanish media telethon event. The telethon will have subject matter expert representatives from DPSS and USCIS on live telecast demystifying the PCI and answering questions from the Univision host. The telethon event will also have DPSS Eligibility Workers taking calls from the Spanish-speaking public regarding the issue; and

3. Designate a "PCI Awareness" day at all Los Angeles County schools, libraries, parks, health centers, community and senior centers, and all County public contact locations. The event will focus on educating the public regarding "Myths and Facts about Food Stamp Benefits". The event will be promoted through partnerships with the media, community-based, and faith-based organizations.

Increased Outreach

Education and outreach remain essential to ensure increased participation rates. FSP eligibility information brochures will be made available at all County public contact sites. Every opportunity to enroll eligible households outside of DPSS district offices will be taken. Collaborations are underway to partner with the City of Los Angeles to increase FS participation rates within the city boundaries. DPSS, upon request, will provide training to staff at non-profit and community stakeholder sites on how to screen and/or connect eligible FS clients to FSP Eligibility Workers. The County is currently putting into place a mechanism to train and allow non-profit and community-based partners with the ability to electronically file FSP applications on behalf of their clients.

In addition, DPSS will continue to co-locate Eligibility Workers at non-traditional sites, such as health clinics, hospitals, food pantries, farmer's markets, churches and schools. Partnerships will continue with the Department of Public Health, Department of Children and Family Services, and Department of Health Services to assess their clients and link them to DPSS for eligibility screening.

One of the newest outreach strategies to be rolled out shortly is the DPSS' Mobile Outreach Vehicle (MOV) which will serve as a satellite office. Eligible individuals and families will be able to apply for and/or receive FSP and Medi-Cal benefits through the off-site MOV. The MOV will be equipped with wireless technology to support the use of laptop equipment. There will be two screening areas for applicant interviews. Plans are in the works to partner with non-profit and faith-based organizations to train and utilize their volunteers to pre-screen their client's eligibility for the FSP and/or Medi-Cal benefits. Protocols are being developed to ensure a smooth "kick-off" and maximization of this outreach program. The MOV is expected to be ready for operation this summer.

The MOV will also serve as the County's emergency response unit to provide residents that have immediate needs due to natural disasters with expedited services and benefits. The MOV will also be made available at community-based and faith-based organizations' events (e.g., health fairs and farmers markets).

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The MOV will be instrumental in reducing food insecurity, increasing FSP utilization, and will provide a platform to better serve thousands of low-income residents to obtain FSP and/or Medi-Cal benefits. The County projects an increased participation of 2,001 households in the FSP. Increasing participation in the FSP and Medi-Cal programs will have a positive impact on the income, health and nutrition, and overall well-being of thousands of low-income residents of Los Angeles County.

Conclusion

While the principal goal of the FSP is to feed hungry people and provide essential nutrition, FSP benefits also encourage healthy eating and are a stimulus to local economies. Most instrumental in the implementation of the three focus areas is collaboration among County, State, and federal agencies and continued efforts with our non-profit and faith-based and community-based organizations. We will continue to work together to fully implement the three focus areas identified in this report. Getting food to those most in need is the ultimate goal.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please let me know, or have your staff contact Kathy House, Acting Deputy Chief Executive Officer, at (213) 974-4530.

WTF:BC:KH
DS:RG:cvb

c: All County Departments